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Beyond Amerikanuak

by William A. Douglas, Ph.D.
Professor and Coordinator of Basque Studies,
University of Nevada-Reno

Now that the era of the Basque sheepman is over, what of the Basque-Americans who have inherited the images, though few if any of the realities, of that period? In the 1990 U.S. census nearly 50,000 people, half of whom reside in California, Nevada and Idaho, self-identified as Basques. There are currently more than 20 Basque social clubs in the United States, primarily in communities like Boise, Elko, Reno, San Francisco, Bakersfield, and others. Most sponsor a folk dance group and an annual festival which

puts on public display the Old World Basque peasant heritage (folk costume, folk dances, and woodchopping, weight-carrying, weight-lifting competitions) and the New World sheepherding legacy (the western barbecue and social dance, sheephooking competition, sheep dog exhibitions). The festivals emerged as the Basque-American contribution to what has been called the "roots phenomenon," whereby in recent years "hyphenated" Americans have come to celebrate their ethnic heritage.

The other major expression of Basque-American ethnicity was the Basque hotel located in the servicing centers of the open range districts of the American West. Usually, founded by an ex-herder and his wife, the hotels began as boarding houses serving the sheepherder who was in transit to a new job, vacationing in town following a year on the range, or seasonally unemployed during the winter months after fall shipping and before spring lambing. For the herders the hotel was truly home. It was also the prime vehicle for formation of Basque-American families and, by extension, the Basque-American community. For it was in a hotel that a herder was likely to meet an eligible bride recruited by the hotel keeper from the Basque Country to serve as waitress or maid. The few single women in a largely male world seldom remained single for long.

If the majority of herders were sojourners who, after several years of shepherding, returned to Europe with their savings, there gradually emerged a core of Basque-American families committed to a future in America. They and their descendants provided an additional dimension to the hotel clientele. For Basque-Americans it served as ethnic enclave where one could rub shoulders with Old World Basques, practice one's less-than-polished Basque language skills, celebrate a wedding or baptism, or simply enjoy a Basque meal.

By the 1950s the combination of several factors stimulated ethnic curiosity and associational impulses among Basque-Americans. The first was the glorification of rural life styles in an America increasingly disillusioned with contemporary life in the consumer society. The second was the search for ancestral roots. And the third was a generational distancing of a Basque-American community from both its Old World peasant and New World ranching heritages. In 1959 Robert Laxalt published *Sweet Promised Land*, an account of his father's life as a Basque sheepman in the American West and subsequent return to his natal village in the French Basque country. The bestselling book summed up the family history of most Basque-Americans and communicated its essence to a wider public. The Basque-Americans had their literary spokesman.

In 1959 the first National Basque Festival, held in Nevada, was attended by several thousand persons. It drew together for the first time Basques from throughout the American West. It provided the stimulus for the creation of Basque clubs in several communities, as well as the festival model which they adopted as their prime activity.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, then, Basque ethnicity evolved from an intimate expression largely confined to the privacy of the Basque-American home and the precincts of the semiprivate Basque boardinghouse to a conscious display of ethnic pride. Basque social clubs proliferated, their dance groups were increasingly requested to put on public performances, and the Basque festival in a dozen communities emerged as a major local, and even regional, attraction. Often, it was the object of considerable media attention.

The Basque hotel, with its cuisine served family-style in an exotic ethnic setting, was discovered by non-Basques. This conversion of the former, no-nonsense, working men's boarding houses into tourist attractions was accelerated during the 1970s with the decline of the open range sheep industry and the demise of the Basque herder within it. Several hotels ceased to accept boarders at all, becoming eating establishments exclusively; meanwhile Basque restaurants which had never catered to herders appeared on the scene. Whether a converted hotel or new enterprise, the Basque restaurant has become a monument to studied ethnicity—a place where Old World peasant artifacts and graphic village scenes share wall space with memorabilia from life on the western ranges. Costumed waitresses and bartenders, not necessarily Basques themselves, serve the patrons and are schooled to answer the oft-repeated question, "Who are the Basques?"

In1989 in Reno 2500 persons gathered to dedicate the National Monument to the Basque Sheepherder. Its centerpiece is an abstract sculpture by noted Basque sculptor Nestor Basterretxea. It evokes the solitary figure of the herder, lamb on his shoulders, standing tall under an imposing firmament. The dedication ceremony was pregnant with both symbolism and controversy. For Basque-Americans desirous of a traditional figurative representation of their ancestors' contributions the work was unsatisfactory. Nor were the delegation of dignitaries from the Basque country entirely comfortable with the peasant and sheepherding depiction of Basque essence, since they wished to project the public image of one of Europe's more modern and industrialized regions. For present purposes, however, the important point is that the very conception of the monument itself represents a watershed development for the Basque-American community. Commemoration of a way of life in bronze is most certainly a statement about its passing.

In short, then, Old World peasant origins and a New World sheepherding legacy are increasingly irrelevant to the Basque ethnic identity in the American West. Today's Basque-American is likely two or three generations removed from Europe and unlikely to have been born on a sheep ranch. The union between an Old-World-born ex-herder and the New-World-born daughter of a Basque rancher or hotelkeeper, once quite common, is largely a thing of the past. Today's Basque-American family typically entails a "mixed marriage." Few young Basque-Americans are exposed to the Basque language in their homes. The Basque boardinghouse, once the lynchpin of the Basque-American community, has simply disappeared, or rather evolved into an eating establishment which caters more to the wider American public than to the needs of Basque-Americans. The festivals of the individual clubs are also showing signs of fatigue; all of the older ones are experiencing declining attendance. It seems evident, then, that we are truly at the end of an era.

Should this be lamented? Is the race over? The answer to both questions is probably "No." On the one hand, it is likely that the social clubs, the restaurants and the festivals will continue their activities at some level. Irish-Americans celebrate St. Patrick's Day and Celtic New Year—including folk costume, dance and traditional games. The level of enthusiasm of the Sons of Erin continues unabated even though, arguably, most Irish-Americans are increasingly out of touch with the contemporary reality of Ireland.

In the case of some Basque-Americans, as with a small segment of Irish and other hyphenated Americans, there is also a discernible interest in moving beyond the folkloric and celebratory expressions of ethnic heritage. This is manifested in the interest of a

minority in many clubs to sponsor Basque language classes for the membership. It is reflected in the decision of the Basque-American student to attend a summer, semester or year-long course held in the Basque Country and organized by a consortium of American universities. The travel of young Basque-Americans to Europe is increasingly complemented by that of European Basque students who come to the United States to study. Indeed, to the extent that Basque-Americans marry Old-World Basques it is becoming increasingly common for the union to be between university students who met while one was studying in the other's country.

Finally, there are now institutional commitments to the sustenance of Basque culture in the United States which were entirely lacking when the *Amerikanuak* were founding their first social clubs and festivals. Since the 1970s North American Basque Organizations, Inc. (NABO) has provided an umbrella organization for the Basque social clubs in the United States. NABO regularly sponsors contacts between Basque-Americans and the Basque Country, while forging regional ties between the Basque organizations of the United States. Three American universities have made commitments to Basque culture. Boise State University teaches the language and cosponsors the study abroad courses in the Basque Country. The University of California Santa Barbara has a Basque Studies chair. And the University of Nevada-Reno has a Basque Studies Program along with being the prime organizer of the study abroad initiatives in Europe. For its part, *Euskojaularitza*, or the government of the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain, has since 1980 pursued a policy of fomenting close ties with the Basque emigrant diaspora worldwide, including communities in South American and Australia. It regularly provides funding to NABO and to the American university initiatives.

If dedication of the National Monument to the Basque Sheepherder marked the end of one era for Basque-Americans, then the decision to hold *Jaialdi* in Boise in 1990 may have initiated another. *Jaialdi*, or "Festive Event," incorporated elements of the standard Basque festival (folk dance, costume, Basque food), yet transcended it. Its participants included a charter flight of European Basques as well as many Basque students studying throughout the United Sates. The Basque government sent several of the best performing artists to the event, where they alternated with Basque folk dance groups from throughout the American West. The festivities included a contemporary Basque film festival, a Basque dance performance and a Basque lecture series underwritten by the Idaho Humanities Council. Approximately 30,000 persons, Basque and non-Basque, attended the *Jaialdi*. Each one had the opportunity to reinterpret the Basque experience against an historical backdrop of political separatism, of economic uncertainty and change, of linguistic differentiation, of cultural assimilation, and an immense array of other social factors that run together to form the heritage of any group. It is out of the elements of a *Jaialdi* that a new Basque-American identity for the 21st-century is likely to emerge—if it is to emerge at all.